

Upheaval in the East: A Winter of Rebellion

The Baltics

Lithuanians Say Gorbachev Eases Off

By ESTHER B. FEIN
Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Jan. 4 — In a sign that President Mikhail S. Gorbachev might be softening his vehement stand against the splintering of the Soviet Communist Party, Communist leaders in Lithuania said tonight that Mr. Gorbachev had strongly indicated that he would not try to force them to reverse their decision last month to break from Moscow.

Mr. Gorbachev and senior Lithuanian Communists met in Moscow today for more than five hours to discuss the Lithuanians' defiant decision and to plan the Soviet leader's trip to Lithuania next week to assess the mood of ordinary Communists in the republic.

"Gorbachev seemed not only resigned to the fact that our decision was irreversible, but he seemed to have moved forward to the point where he realizes that this was a necessary move for the party as a whole," said Romualdas Ozolas, a member of the newly independent party's politburo, who took part in the meetings today. "It was clearly no secret to him that if the party doesn't accept such changes, one fine day the party will find itself completely without power."

Delay in Latvia

In the neighboring Baltic republic of Latvia, the Communist Party central committee had been scheduled to meet on Friday to decide on following the Lithuanian Communists' move to secede from the Soviet Communist Party, but party officials said the meeting was postponed so they could see the results of Mr. Gorbachev's visit to Lithuania before voting.

"This is not an indication that the party is changing its mind about becoming independent," said Dainis Zelmenis, an official in the Latvian foreign ministry. "But we also do not want to be provocative at a time when there are serious meetings and visits going on elsewhere in connection with this very issue."

Communist Party leaders met today in the third Baltic republic, Estonia, and decided to hold a conference of the central committee in February to determine whether the party will follow Lithuania's lead and split with Moscow. The conference will be followed in March by a full party congress, which is to ratify or reject the leadership's recommendations.

At the meeting today, the Estonian



The New York Times/Jan. 5, 1990

Party leaders in Latvia awaited outcome of meeting in Moscow between Lithuanian leaders and Mr. Gorbachev.

More than 200 people gathered in New York to pay tribute to Andrei D. Sakharov, the human rights advocate, who died Dec. 14. Page B5.

Communist Party leader, Vaino Valas, stressed not only that local Communist parties needed to be independent, but also that one single party could not accommodate the range of political opinions that exist today.

The parliaments of both Latvia and Lithuania have legally sanctioned multi-party systems in their republics by abolishing the Communist Party's constitutionally guaranteed monopoly on power, a move that is expected to be taken by Estonia shortly.

Mr. Gorbachev, who is leader of the Soviet Communist Party as well as head of state, has strongly opposed establishment of a multi-party system now, saying that only the Communist Party can successfully lead the country through its current economic and political crisis.

He has also said the Communist Party must remain united and centrally run from Moscow, and originally described the Lithuanian party's declaration of independence as a cause of great "concern and alarm."

At the meeting in Moscow today, the participants said, Mr. Gorbachev did not endorse the Lithuanian party's decision or rescind his criticism. But they said there were clear signs that there was room for compromise in the position of the central authorities.

"After long and intensive talks, Gorbachev came to a better understanding of the motivations and the reasons behind the action," said Vladimir Berezov, second secretary of the Lithuanian Party. "I think this will affect the future course of the party's response."

Mr. Gorbachev was joined by the Communist Party's ideology chief, Vadim A. Medvedev, and the Secretary for International Affairs, Aleksandr N. Yakovlev, in the talks with 11 members of the independent Lithuanian Communist Party.

In an interview with Lithuanian television after returning to Vilnius, the Lithuanian party leader, Algirdas Brazauskas, described the meeting as constructive, positive and helpful. Mr. Brazauskas has often been rebuked by Mr. Gorbachev for supporting defiant, separatist moves in his republic.

The Lithuanian party leader in charge of ideology, Justas Paleckis, said he was pleased with the results, but emphasized that "conflicts remain that were not resolved."

Role of Sajudis Discussed

Among the many subjects raised in the day-long meeting was the role played in the republic by Sajudis, a grass-roots political organization supported by a majority of Lithuanians that advocates the republic's secession from the Soviet Union.

Lithuanian Communist Party officials themselves have begun to talk about the need to create the conditions that would allow the republic to secede. At an emergency meeting last week of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee, called to discuss the Lithuanian action, Mr. Gorbachev said such talk by Communist officials was a sign of caving in to pressure by the separatist-minded Sajudis.

Mr. Ozolas said that Mr. Gorbachev was poorly informed about the platforms, goals and support of Sajudis, and that he seemed to get most of his information from "one-sided reports by the central press, not from Lithuanians themselves."

In a further indication that Mr. Gorbachev recognizes the need for change within the Communist Party, he told the visiting delegation that there would be "doubtless and unprecedented changes in the direction of the democratization of the party" at a special party meeting called for the end of the month.